

"You mean like, hell?" I asked.

"Not hell, no. More like... the underworld."

I turned to the impenetrable blackness into which the black waters of the river were swallowed.

"Tartarus must be down there... then this," Kira continued, motioning to the river, "must be Acheron."

"I'm getting really bad vibes," Corbin offered. "What do you say we check out one or two of these caves, then get the hell out of here? This place is not going anywhere. We can go to the University in Athens, and return later with a professor of archeology."

This sounded like a wise plan to me, and Kira concurred. The obvious choice for further exploration was the golden door, but when I tried to force it open, it would not budge.

Returning to the tablet, I scanned over the list of names, and stopped upon one which caught my interest. *Polyhymnia*. I motioned to the name, then to the corresponding cave at the southwest corner of the chamber. Kira and Corbin following at my heels, we walked up and into the cavern.

A short flight of cracked granite stairs led to a long, fungus-illuminated hall, which was for the most part, but not entirely, straight. The floor was marble, covered with paintings and inscriptions of simplistic beauty, but I did not even allow these decorations more than an instant's notice, for the walls, or rather, what was in the walls, had attracted my undivided attention.

Large empty sections on either side of the wall had been chiseled out of the rock. These *holding pens*, for lack of a better word, were evident along the entire length of the hall. Each of these holding pens appeared to contain, however unbelievable this may sound, a live animal. The three enclosures closest to me were inhabited by a black panther, a tiger, and a mountain lion, respectively. All three animals were in the prime of health. The panther, for one, was disconcertingly lithe, muscular, and agile. Crouched as though intent on springing, it judged me with glowing emerald eyes. When I first spotted the agile cat, not seven meters from where I stood, I stepped back

abruptly in fear. My display of weakness attracted the panther's aggression; shadow flew through shadow.

I was certain I was doomed, for with Kira and Corbin so close behind, I had no room to back away from the panther's lethal trajectory. But, astonishingly, at the mid-point of its leap, where the outer edge of the holding pen met the hall, the panther struck a previously invisible barrier. The barrier flashed brilliantly in all the colors of the rainbow, tracing a circular pattern analogous to the contours of the panther's body. The panther bounced gracefully back from the impact, twisting in midair and rebalancing itself to land easily on all fours.

To say that we were amazed to discover those ferociously beautiful animals in their fantastically unreal holding cages would be a great understatement. After gradually rebuilding my courage, I cautiously stepped back to the edge of the panther's cage, trying to afford myself a better look. The room was no more than fifteen meters wide, but it swept back a considerable distance into theinky darkness. The panther had retreated back into that name void, and I would have been completely unaware of its location, had not its emerald eyes given it away. Those eyes were narrow, intelligent, *thinking*.

I stepped closer. The rainbow impressions on the invisible barrier had faded completely. What was the strange barrier made of? Would it resist another attempt by the panther to leap for my throat? Was the barrier still there at all?

As I pondered these questions, the panther melted from the darkness into the dim fluorescent light. Striding smoothly to the threshold of the cage, not more than an arm's length distant, it stood, balancing itself on the barrier with its two front paws, birthing rainbow ripples which spread across my line of sight like psychedelic sonar waves.

The panther was an imposing figure, standing nearly equal to my height on its hind legs. It must have been five or six hundred pounds of pure, lean muscle. I looked deeply into those emerald pupils, and the panther returned my gaze fearlessly. The